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Collaborative Timeline of Historical Events in Religion

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Teaching Tactics

Describe a successful classroom teaching tactic that could be replicated by other instructors.

Collaborative Timeline of Historical Events in Religion

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The context: An undergraduate survey course on the history of Mormons or any course with significant focus on the historical development of a particular religion.

The pedagogical purpose: To grapple with the complexity of documenting the history of religion by developing a chronological frame of knowledge through research and representation of historical events and scholarship. Students engage with the complexity of: (1) historical and religious phenomena, (2) temporal and causal relations, and (3) scholars, religious leaders, and journalists attempting to describe the relationship between these phenomena.

Description of the strategy: Collaborate with a librarian to create a library research guide on a historical event (the discovery of the Newark Holy Stones, for example) to help students research broadly in library databases, scholarly journals, newspapers, websites, and institutional archives. Divide the class into research groups clustered around a specific lens of inquiry (for example, journalistic versus church-affiliated accounts). Using an online bibliographic management tool such as Zotero (www.zotero.org) allows collaborative work outside the classroom. Groups create different timelines, based on their different lenses. A tool such as Timeline JS (<http://bit.ly/1Aw6gng>) transforms their Zotero bibliographies into a digital timeline shareable with the whole class. Disparate voices combined into a single timeline create a compelling visual to discuss and deconstruct.

This teaching tactic is best deployed in steps over the course of a semester. Allow ample time for students to both familiarize themselves with Zotero and the library research guide. Individual sessions with each group will be necessary. An example of the teaching tactic can be accessed here: <http://bit.ly/1w34KkY>.

Why is it effective: (1) The plotting of the bibliographies on the merged timeline is a compelling visual for students to dissect how information and knowledge can be reconstituted into various forms beyond the academic essay. (2) A visual timeline, created through a student's own research, underscores the complexity of understanding a single religious event. (3) Students gain the critical perspective necessary to recognize how seemingly benign chronological frames, such as a timeline, are arguments in and of themselves.